

## **Ruth Bryan Owen Rohde**

Marina Shah  
University Laboratory High School, Urbana  
Teacher: Adele Suslick

Women were not always able to serve in the U.S. government. Nor did they have many civil rights. There was even a time when the American citizenship of a woman was questioned if she married a man from another country. One woman who dealt with these problems was Ruth Bryan Owen Rohde. Not only did Ruth encounter prejudice, she fought it. In addition, she traveled to various places around the world, eventually entered Congress in Florida, and became Minister to Denmark.

Ruth Bryan Owen Rohde was born on October 2, 1885, in Jacksonville, Illinois, the daughter of Mary Elizabeth Baird Bryan and William Jennings Bryan. Ruth began school in Illinois and finished it in Nebraska after moving there with her family. Ruth grew up in a political atmosphere and aspired to be like her parents, both of whom were involved in law and government.

Ruth married three times and received her first experiences working outside the home during her second marriage. Her first husband was an artist named Homer Leavitt, and they were married for seven years, during which time Ruth had two children before her divorce in 1909. In 1910, Ruth married Reginald Altham Owen and lived in England and Jamaica. Major Owen was part of the Royal Engineers, and Ruth had one son with him during the four years Major Owen spent in Jamaica and England. While she was in London, Ruth spent thirteen months working with Mrs. Herbert Hoover as secretary-treasurer of the American Woman's War Relief Fund, which operated workrooms for women lacking jobs. She then worked at a Devonshire war hospital. When her husband

became sick and unable to work, Ruth took over as family breadwinner by lecturing, teaching, and directing at the University of Miami. Ruth married again later in life, after being appointed Minister to Denmark.

Ruth's interest in politics prompted her to maintain her father's campaign correspondence when she was younger. This later helped her win a seat in Congress in 1928. Even though Ruth lost the 1926 Democratic congressional primary, her strong political background inspired her to run again after her husband's death in 1928. Ruth managed to win this congressional race by appealing directly to voters, a technique she learned from her father.

After Ruth won a place in Congress, her Republican opponent became angry because he had lost to a woman and challenged her American citizenship. Ruth argued to gain her citizenship back, even though she had married an "alien"; eventually she won her case and regained her citizenship. Once she took her position in Congress, Ruth was unanimously accepted by the Committee on Elections and helped women gain independent citizenship. In other words, women could keep their American citizenship no matter whom they married. In 1930, Ruth was reelected to Congress.

Ruth's dedication to her job is reflected in her accomplishments while in Congress. In one instance, Ruth was arguing to win property for the government. Her opponent was arguing that snakes were a problem in the Everglades and, therefore, the property was undesirable. She responded to this by wrapping a snake around her neck to demonstrate her lack of fear for snakes. While in Congress, Ruth extended women's rights by approving a woman's appointment to a cabinet office. She also focused on

child welfare, the welfare of families, and health issues by allocating funds for international conferences on these subjects.

After serving two years in Congress, Ruth ran again and lost because she was beaten two-to-one in a “wet” vs. “dry” race regarding the purchase of alcohol. Ruth’s career in government, however, was not over yet. President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed her Minister to Denmark in 1933, making this Illinois woman the first to hold such a high diplomatic post representing the United States.

After marrying Captain Borge Rohde, Ruth returned to the United States with her family, continued her writing, and lectured. In 1939, she became a visiting professor for Monticello College. Even though Ruth no longer worked in government, her political interests were passed on to her daughter, Helen Rudd Owen. Ruth died in 1954 and was buried near Copenhagen in Denmark.

All in all, Ruth Bryan Owen Rohde led a fulfilling and meaningful life. She was able to assume a position in Congress, have a large family, serve as Minister to Denmark, and pass on her love for politics to her daughter. She was an influential woman who helped achieve important changes in laws and finance. [From Ken Bonner, “County will not receive tax on alcohol.” *Daily Sentinel* Scottsboro, AL. January 27, 2005.

<<http://www.potsdam.edu>>. (Sept. 29, 2008); Gail Clement, “Ruth Bryan Owen (Rohde).” N.D. Florida International University. <<http://everglades.fiu.edu>>. (Sept. 8, 2008); Paolo Coletta, “Ruth Bryan Owen Rohde.” *Dictionary of American Biography*. Biography Resource Center. Farmington Hills, Mich. 2008.

<<http://galenet.galegroup.com>>. (Aug. 25, 2008); Jo Freeman, “Ruth Bryan Owen: Florida’s First Congresswoman.” *F.A.W.L. Journal*, p. 15. 2000. <<http://uic.edu>>. (Sept.

11, 2008); and “Ruth Bryan Owen Rohde.” *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Biography Resource Center. Gale Research. 1998. <<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet.BioRC>>. (Sept. 8, 2008).]